

“Holidays for Sustainability” – case study about education for sustainable development in a Bulgarian Nature Park as a form of tourism

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The central objective of the education for sustainable development is to shape competences and this needs active learning. Bulgarian nature parks, IV and V International Union for the Conservation of Nature protected area categories, are models of sustainability where lessons learnt can be experienced. For such an experience, the trainees should first travel to and stay for a while in the protected area, which is in fact a form of tourism. Educational activities as well as tourism are two of the three management goals of the Bulgarian nature parks, which are often understood and pursued separately. The project “Holidays for Sustainability” is an example for reconciling both protected areas’ management goals – education and tourism. Moreover this project is based on the education for sustainable development concept and contributes to the acquiring of competences. It provides know-how for a modern approach of educational tourism in the Bulgarian nature parks.

The Problem in Bulgaria

The intellectual power of Bulgaria is strongly concentrated in the capital, which results in an empty rural countryside. Mass tourism and big hotels invade the nature, while alternative tourism and traditional environmental friendly guest houses in the villages are not attractive for young people. The connection between citizens and nature, citizens and villages fades away. Furthermore, the Bulgarian school does not educate environmental awareness and sustainable lifestyle among the pupils. There are seldom classroom and extracurricular lessons, exercises and teaching experience for applying education for sustainable development (ESD) in and outside the school. Officially, the Nature Park Administrations are responsible for regional development in a sustainable way, for developing alternative tourism and for conducting educational activities.

The Research Question

How the local communities could be supported through tourism in nature parks and at the same time raise environmental awareness among teenagers achieving education for sustainable development goals?

Goal and Objectives

This case study aims to find a solution for the identified needs in Bulgaria investigating a possible approach for developing forms of cooperation between alternative tourism and ESD in the Bulgarian nature park Vrachansky Balkan.

The research also aimed to discover a way to encourage a new attitude towards the traditional Bulgarian village and the surrounding nature by young people from the city and to extend and deepen the knowledge on sustainable development in the dialogue between young people from the capital and young people from rural regions in Bulgaria. Another objective was to discover a way to raise high-school teachers' knowledge in sustainable development and train them in non-formal education methods. Also, to find a way to develop, illustrate and promote the potential of an alternative tourism, combined with aspects of ESD; to encourage people living in rural regions to explore concepts of alternative tourism and to manage environmentally friendly guest-houses.

Target groups

The target groups of the case study are young people, teachers and local people.

Teenagers from the capital and from rural areas were addressed, because this is the age when young people develop their own value system and this provides an opportunity to make them sensible of environmental issues.

High-school teachers from Sofia and from the rural regions of Vratsa and Montana, who were interested in environmental education and explore possibilities of using active learning methods, were involved.

The rural population of the Vratsa region was included for widening their perspectives and raising awareness about the potential of sustainable development and alternative tourism.

Method of Research - The project "Holidays for Sustainability"

The practical experience based on the project "Holidays for Sustainability" is used. Results are analyzed and discussed for answering the research question.

The project was implemented by a Bulgarian NGO in partnership with the Administration of Nature Park Vrachansky Balkan, 3 NGOs, 5 villages' mayoralities and 4 culture houses.

During the school holidays of 2013, six weekly experiential learning oriented trainings were organized in 5 different villages located in the "Vrachansky Balkan" Nature Park. The trainings involved 139 students, accompanied by 22 teachers from different secondary schools from Sofia and Vratsa region and also 12 other interested trainers. The number of participants was higher than expected and 2 extra trainings had to be organized.

Reaching the ESD goals

Trainings focused on sustainable development on global, local and individual level and the program was based on active learning methods. The focus was on practical exercises. Participants had to get familiar with local characteristics – nature, culture, traditions. They elaborated 27 sustainable concepts and strategies for regional development, specific for each village, which were presented in final *Open door* events for the local people in each village. The young people from the trainings also took part in the sustainable local initiatives with creative activities and small own projects.

A Handbook with the educational methods used during the seminars was produced and presented as a tool for doing ESD, which supported the work of trainers.

Alternative tourism aspect

The participants were accommodated in villagers' houses. About 15 houses were involved and encouraged to turn into eco-friendly guest-houses. More than 25% of the average inhabitants of the villages visited the *Open door* events, thus local communities have become more sensitive to sustainability. Local infrastructural initiatives suggested by the local communities took place. They aimed to humanize certain places through sustainable practices and make the villages nicer for inhabitants and visitors – eco trails, information plates and signboards, public fountain taps, solar batteries for public lighting, etc.

Discussion and analysis of results

The qualitative and quantitative evaluation of the trainings was based on personal interviews and questionnaires. The educational activities were useful for 95% of the teachers and for 90% of the students. More than 90% of all participants mark them as very good and excellent and 75% said that they learned many new things. The trainings would be recommended to others from 98.5% of the participants. Teachers shared that they were impressed by the applied active learning methods. Some of the favorite activities of the students were the outdoor activities, the educational games and the practical work. Fundamental shaping competences were defined for the trainings and each participant chose from a list of 3, which he/she acquired during the training. The competences, chosen by the respective percentage of participants showed that all defined shaping competences were well promoted during the trainings and it can be seen on the Figure below.

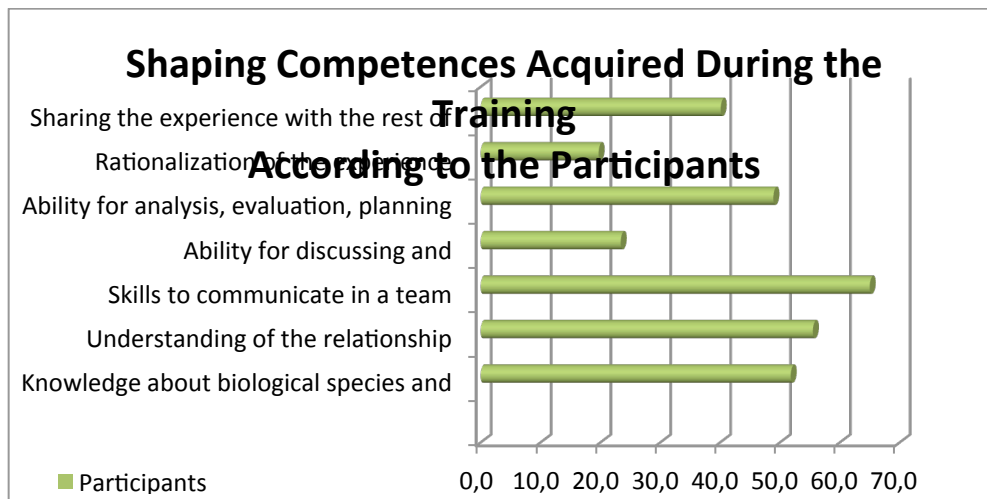


Figure: Shaping competences acquired during the trainings according to the participants.

Conclusion

The results from the project “Holidays for Sustainability” show that organizing multi-day experiential trainings for young people in protected areas is a modern form of tourism, which contributes to the education for sustainable development, but also supports local economies and helps preserving nature, traditional culture and values.

It fills the gap of information and practice in the high school curriculum, is an example for ESD activities, promotes the educational instead of mass tourism, and creates visual and teaching materials for sustainable lifestyle. ESD is applied on different levels – youths, teachers/trainers and local communities. The project achievements are thanks to the effective relations between the local and national partner organizations.

It was nominated as an Innovative practice in Bulgaria and despite its limited range it could be a successful approach applied in other nature parks. The challenge is to multiply this good model for educational tourism in Bulgaria.

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